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SUBJECT: THE POLITICS OF ALLIANCE RELATIONS (2 OF 3)

REF: SEOUL 01211

Classified By: CDA BILL STANTON. REASONS 1.4 (b/d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: This is the second in a series of cables on the politics of U.S.-ROK Alliance relations. Reftel A explored how the ROK perceives its security environment, concluding that the Korean public and their policy makers are heavily conflicted when it comes to relations with their neighboring countries. For most Koreans, however, the U.S.-ROK Alliance remains central to South Korean security. But what exactly do the South Koreans want from their alliance with the United States? According to more than a dozen Korean security experts interviewed for this report, the ROK seeks a sense of security from the United States, but with the caveat that care be taken not to offend Korean pride in the process. They also revealed great interest in, and voiced significant doubts about, the "true intentions" of the United States. In addition, our interlocutors noted the primacy of economic concerns in Korean security planning.
END SUMMARY

REPORT 2: THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

A Sense of Security

12. (C) The No. 1 answer to the question -- What do South Koreans want from their Alliance with the United States? -- is that they seek a "sense of security." Former ROK Foreign Minister Yoon Young-kwan said that with all due respect to the other members in the Six-Party Talks, it was the U.S.-ROK Alliance that remained the key to solving the North Korean nuclear problem, whether the DPRK ended up having a soft landing or a hard one. Others with whom we met similarly took the view that South Korea's sense of security, or insecurity, largely centered upon its alliance with the United States. While that response was not surprising in itself, when they were pressed to define what that "sense of security" meant to the Korean people, experts' answers highlighted three main points:

-- Although South Koreans want the security provided by a continued U.S. presence on the Korean Peninsula, it comes with the powerful caveat that care be taken not to offend Korean pride in the process.

-- Economic stability decidedly trumped military deterrence, far more than most Americans realize.

-- Many Koreans question whether U.S. intentions today are truly aligned with Korean interests. It is thus important to South Koreans to divine the "true intentions" of the U.S. Government.

These three elements of what the Korean people want from the Alliance are elaborated on in more detail below. Taken as a whole, they indicate the paramount role the U.S. military

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presence continues to play in South Korean national security planning, and the primacy the Korean public places on the avoidance of conflict on their land.

Without Sacrificing Pride

13. (C) If alliance with the United States is so important to South Korea, why is the ROKG so hard-nosed in negotiations over the amount of burdensharing it provides to support the stationing of U.S. Forces in Korea? Why hasn't the ROKG allowed the United States to build a new Chancery to replace the current dilapidated building, first constructed in 1958? Why did they allow the Ministry of Environment to supersede the SOFA process on camp returns over relatively minor and disputed incidents of pollution? The answer to these and other aggravating issues in our relations with South Korea is that it is precisely because the ROKG must rely upon the USG as a security guarantor that it is so prickly about acquiescing to "U.S. demands" until a face-saving way can be found to accommodate our needs, while preserving their pride. In the words of Park Se-il, President of the conservative Hansun Foundation, "The United States is usually seen as right, but too often as arrogant."

14. (C) With that kind of sentiment shared by many Koreans, how the ROKG responds to what the USG requests often depends on how that request is delivered or negotiated. Lee Hong-koo, a former ROK Ambassador to the United States, complained that while the ROK's GDP has grown by over 100 percent in just the last generation, Washington too often treats South Korea as if it were a dependent country. Former Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun, who is now a professor of international relations at Ewha University, said the United States still treated South Korea like a small child. These are exaggerated statements, but the rapid changes that have occurred in Korean society and politics in recent years have created a new lense through which the U.S.-ROK relationship is viewed. For example, while the Alliance succeeded in containing the spread of communism on the peninsula, today's generation of politicians, including President Roh himself, are highly critical of past ROK authoritarian rulers, and by extension of U.S. support for those military governments.

For many Koreans, the mere perception of a demanding tone emanating from Washington harkens back to a time in modern Korean history that is now very fashionable to discredit.

It's the Economy

¶5. (C) Despite heightened emphasis in Korean society on addressing historical wrongs, it is the present and future that most Koreans worry about. Like people everywhere, they seek a brighter economic future for themselves and for their families. Experts consulted for this report all agreed that security concerns for the majority of South Korean citizens are deeply rooted in their economic interests. It is falling stocks and not falling bombs about which they are most concerned. In that light, the ROK's engagement policy toward the North has more to do with preventing economic disaster

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than opening up the DPRK, although many of them hope the latter will occur as a by-product of South Korean economic assistance. Like the "Sunshine Policy" before it, President Roh's "Peace and Prosperity Policy" toward the North is an insurance policy taken out to protect against hostility. Many Koreans join him in believing the DPRK is less likely to engage in hostile actions against the South so long as it is hearing kind words and receiving significant amounts of aid from Seoul. One analyst pointed out that the presence of hundreds of South Korean workers in the North also serves as an insurance policy against unilateral military action by the United States.

Divining U.S. Intentions

¶6. (C) Directly related to preserving stable South Korean economic growth is the question of what the U.S. intentions truly are in the region. Put self-evidently by one of our interlocutors, as long as U.S. interests are in alignment with the needs of South Korea, the Alliance will remain strong. Many voiced concerns, however, that the United States may be more interested in fighting the global war on terror. They cautioned that Koreans needed continued assurances that the United States remains fully committed to the ROK. Answers to our question -- What does South Korea want from the Alliance? -- included frequent calls for the United States to reveal its true intentions (bonshim) and demonstrate greater consistency in its policy toward North Korea. For example, former Unification Minister Jeong challenged the validity of Washington's "zero tolerance" policy on a nuclear North Korea. He pointed out that before India and Pakistan became nuclear weapons states, the ROK believed the United States shared its desire for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, but that many now question the true U.S. position.

¶7. (C) Dr. Andrei Lankov of Kookmin University noted that differences between Washington and Seoul are not just differences of perspective, but real differences of interest. What the ROK wants above all is peace, meaning no conflict with North Korea, and prosperity, meaning no collapse of the North either. According to Lankov, the United States wants peace too, but would welcome a collapse of the North Korean regime. Similarly, preventing the proliferation of WMD is a top national security concern for the United States, but is not really South Korea's primary concern, Lankov added. Interestingly, other interlocutors argued the opposite -- that the United States could decide to "manage" a nuclear-armed North Korea, but that this was completely contrary to South Korea's strategic interests. Others saw a closer security policy alignment between Washington and Seoul, but nonetheless pointed out that the order of priority assigned to those national security interests differed.

¶8. (C) Many of the experts consulted noted that even when U.S. intentions were fully in-line with South Korean

interests, it was still important for the United States to make sure its policies were clearly understood in the ROK. Transparency in U.S. foreign policy thinking about North

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Korea, China and Japan remain critically important pieces of information to the ROK. In addition to wanting no surprises from Washington, the ROKG prefers that the tempo of U.S. relations with other countries in the region not exceed, or lag behind its own pace. For example, while welcoming recent U.S. policy decisions regarding North Korea, Seoul worries about being left behind. That is why the ROKG has been stating publicly that its policy toward North Korea will move forward "one half-step behind" progress in the Six-Party Talks. Such statements carry the double meaning that Seoul expects Washington will similarly calibrate the pace of its policy decisions with those of its allies.

19. (C) In the end, South Koreans are less concerned over the number of U.S. troops in Korea, or the structure of those forces, than having a strong sense of U.S. support. According to Dr. Kim Byung-kook of Korea University, "the greatest threat to Korea and the Alliance is from fatigue and frustration in Washington." Dr. Kim, former Foreign Minister Yoon, and others urged the U.S. Government to develop a more effective public diplomacy approach toward South Korea, packaging its message to the Korean people in ways that would reassure them, while at the same time preventing them from feeling bullied or put upon.
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